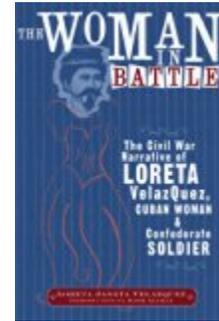


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Loreta Janeta Velazquez. *The Woman in Battle: The Civil War Narrative of Loreta Velazquez, A Cuban Woman and Confederate Soldier*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. lxvi + 606 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-19424-6; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-19420-8.

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## Keeping Secrets

*The Woman in Battle* was first issued in 1876 in Richmond, Virginia, and Hartford, Connecticut. The text did not reappear until 1970, and then somewhat later as an online facsimile available on the Documenting the American South electronic series compiled at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. This volume is a reprint of the earliest edition, without abridgment, and Jesse Aleman claims that it will find an audience not only with scholars of the Civil War, but also with those interested in nineteenth-century American literature and history, in gender and Latino studies, as well as students of the autobiographical narrative. Aleman has not added to the long text with a history of the debate concerning its authenticity, but instead has presented the narrative as the sensationalist, secessionist, and pro-Confederacy autobiographical account of the cross-dressing Cuban woman who fought in the Civil War that so shocked the 1876 readership.

Confederate General Jubal Early was shocked not only because of the cross-dressing Loreta Velazquez/Harry T. Buford narrative (even though there had been several accounts of women masquerading as men in the Civil War), but also because the story challenged deep-seated ideologies of Southern gender codes. For example, Velazquez observes that women threw themselves into the arms of “Lieutenant Harry T. Buford” without waiting to be asked; Southern honor was at stake. Early goes on to point out some flagrant inaccuracies in the text and concludes that the text was written by a Yankee hack.[1]

But this account is not the work of an unlettered, uneducated Northerner. Loreta Janeta Velazquez, whoever that person might be, came to New Orleans from Cuba in the 1850s, attended Catholic schools there, seduced her best-friend’s betrothed, and eloped with him to Mormon territory. Once war was declared, he joined the Confederate army, and once he was gone, Velazquez outfitted herself with a wire bodice and an army uniform to become Harry T. Buford. As Buford, she organized an Arkansas regiment and participated in the battles of Bull Run, Balls Bluff, Fort Donelson, and Shiloh. Then, deciding to be a spy, she became a woman again and infiltrated the Yankee ranks; posing as a double agent, she helped the Confederate cause from the other side of the Mason-Dixon Line and trafficked in counterfeit money and bonds, contraband, and bounty-jumping scams.

Sensationalism aside, what is important to scholars today—besides the fact that *Woman in Battle* is a “good read”—is the invasion and study of the masculine public war space. It speaks “to the instability of gender and national identity” (p. xiv) in nineteenth-century America; it addresses issues of the feminization of the soldier and the possible masculinization of the Southern white woman. Aleman examines this instability in the lengthy but meticulous introduction. Citing the key scholars in Civil War studies, Aleman states that the importance for Velazquez herself as well as the reader is the necessary ambiguity of the tale. What *The Woman in Battle* underscores is the cultural construction of gender, especially in wartime, as she masquerades as not only Buford, but

also a white Northern woman, a Canadian, a French Creole, an English woman, a Spanish officer, a Spanish lady, and a Cuban woman. Behavior, dress, language, and race fluctuate as signifiers of gender: all are collapsed into a fluid “series of performances that render authenticity an impossibility” (p. xxii). Aleman concludes that the narrative presents “national allegories that offer cultural truths about the instability of gender, race, and nation during the Civil War” (p. xxii).

The text questions how one knows what is real and what is unreal during wartime and allows the twenty-first century critic and scholar to deconstruct and reconstruct the key role gender plays in war literature. Chris Hedges’s recent book, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (Public Affairs, 2002), says it all: war provides a rush, excitement, power, exoticism; it allows one to rise above one’s normal station in life; it gives resolve, a cause.

However, the uniqueness and importance of Velazquez’s war story is that it undercuts one of the prime characteristics of war: its reduction of complexity to simplicity. For in wartime, the world is understandable: it is black and white; it is *us* against *them*. *The Woman in Battle* forces us to reconsider our standard conceptions of war, of the war narrative, of the gender of war, and for these considerations all scholars of war narratives, peace studies, and gender studies should be grateful. *The Woman in Battle* is a welcome addition to the war narrative as it challenges the national concept of heterosexual domestic and wartime space.

#### Note

[1]. Letter written to W. H. Slemons, May 22, 1878 in Tucker family papers, no. 2605, at the Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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